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ABSTRACT

The physical and interpersonal contexts within which rapes occur were investigated. The physical context, defined in terms of observers' perceptions of the likelihood of rapes occurring in a particular setting, produce variations in the degree of responsibility assigned to the victim. Women raped in high probability of rape settings were held as more responsible for the rape. The interpersonal context of rape, defined in terms of the degree of prior intimacy between the rapist and the victim, was also highly relevant to observers' judgements. Any prior sexual intercourse between the victim and rapist led to much higher responsibility assigned to the victim, and less responsibility assigned to the rapist. (Author)

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Social Context Variables in the Social Perception of Rape

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The research that I will be describing today, and the proposals for future research that I will be presenting have developed as part of an on-going program of research on the social perception of rape that is being carried out by Lawrence Calhoun, Jim Selby, and myself. Although our program involves an investigation of many aspects of the social perception process, I would like to focus my attention on a set of variables that have been nearly neglected up to this time...those comprising the social context within which the rape occurred.

There is clearly great value in examining the characteristics of the victims and observers that affect the social perception of rape, however, a complete understanding of the attributional judgments being made must take into consideration the potential impact of the context that surrounded the participants during the rape episode.

There are two context variables that we have begun to focus on in our research. We have designated these the Physical Context and the Interpersonal Context. I would like to discuss each of these, present some preliminary results that we have obtained and suggest some directions that future research could take. I should warn you that I will not be able to make anything approximating a conclusive statement at the end, but I hope to show that the research on these variables is a fruitful direction in which to be proceeding.

The physical context, as we have operationalized it, includes the physical setting within which the events transpired, as well as the modifiers necessary to make the setting sufficiently clear to observers.

There is no question that across different settings the actual probability of rape occurring does vary. For example, Brownmiller (1975) in her historical account of rape, describes the increased frequency of rape during

wars and other social upheavals. Additionally, more recent statistics (Amir, 1967) concerning rape indicate that there are certain setting variables that are more highly associated with the occurrence of rapes. Weekend days show a higher frequency of rapes, with nearly 50% occurring on the weekend. The hours between 8:00 p.m. and 2:00 a.m. are also especially dangerous, with nearly half the rapes taking place during this time period. A weekend night would thus seem to be a context within which a rape was much more likely to occur.

The actual physical location of rapes provides additional variability in the context. While most people probably have the image of a rape occurring on a dark street, or some other frightening setting, nearly one-third of the rapes reported take place in the home of the victim. Other common locations were the offender's automobile, the offender's home and the home of some other person. Streets and parks, typical frightening locations accounted for only 14% of the rapes reported (Schram, 1978).

Of course, in research on the social perception of rape, the actual rates at which rapes occur in certain settings may be much less important than the perceived probabilities held by naive observers. Thus, the fact that many rapes do take place in the victim's home is probably less important than the fact that observers consider the home to be a relatively safe setting.

In our research we are trying to devise a procedure which will allow us to identify the characteristics which observers will use in distinguishing settings which they perceive as playing a large versus a small causal role in causing the rape. In essence, the question we are trying to deal with is the impact on attributions made concerning the other possible causal factors - the rapist and the victim - when the setting is varied.

There would seem to be two opposing strategies that observers might employ in dealing with the information about the setting. When the setting is

perceived as an unlikely setting for a rape observers might:

1. Rule out the setting as an important causal factor, and then look for one of the other causal factors to be primarily responsible. Although the logical conclusion would seem to be to assign responsibility to the rapist, we have seen considerable evidence for the tendency to blame the victim. Thus, when the setting is ruled out, the victim may be held more responsible. Since the setting does not often produce rapes, there must be something about the participants in this rape that explains the occurrence.

When the setting is one in which rape is a very common event, this strategy should lead observers to:

2. Decide that the setting is a potentially important causal factor in producing rape, therefore not requiring that other possible causal factors be assigned any significant degree of responsibility. Thus, the victim is held less responsible.

We have called this the "Semi-logical Division of Responsibility" Approach. Basically, observers are imagined to operate on the information presented by seeking the most obvious causal factor based on the prior behaviors that have occurred. It is a semi-logical model because we expect observers will be biased toward an explanation involving the victim. The implication is that a victim who was raped in a setting which has not constrained rape in the past is likely to be perceived as less responsible for the rape than a victim who is raped in a setting where rapes usually do not occur. For example, assuming that observers do not perceive the home as a setting in which rapes often occur, victims who are raped in their homes would be perceived as more responsible than other victims. This becomes a real problem given the already mentioned high rate of rapes in the victim's own home.

The second strategy that we have suggested is a possible approach by

observers is what we call the "Foreseeability" approach. Using this approach when the rape occurred in a setting in which rape is perceived as an unusual event, observers would:

1. See the rape as a unique event which could not have been anticipated, and which cannot therefore be blamed on the victim. She could not have known that the rape would take place in that setting, so she is perceived as less responsible.

When the setting is one in which rape is a common occurrence observers would be expected to:

2. Decide that the victim should have known better than to be in a setting where rape takes place. Since she was in the setting, she is perceived as more responsible for the rape.

The "Foreseeability" approach assumes that observers expect the victim to be responsible for avoiding rape, so as long as she fulfills that responsibility to the best of her ability, she is perceived as less responsible if she is raped. This strategy is probably based on beliefs that the female controls the occurrence or nonoccurrence of sexual activity.

We obtained the first data relevant to the potential impact of context variables in a recent study by Calhoun, Selby and Warring (1976). In this study a rape episode was described in which 3 variables were manipulated:

A) The degree of prior acquaintance between the victim and the rapist - none vs slight - describe

B) the prior rape history of the victim - describe

C) the frequency of rapes in the setting (7 vs 0 in 6 months)

The frequency of rapes in the setting represents a fairly explicit manipulation of the context. This manipulation produced a number of significant effects, although there were no main effects for the context variable.

On two of the questions asked of observers, there was a significant three way interaction involving:

sex of observer x rape history of victim x setting

The two questions involved the observers' perceptions of

1. the extent to which the victim's behavior the night of the rape led to her being raped
2. the degree to which the rape was the victim's fault

The pattern of results was the same for each of these items.

Female observers seemed to use a slight variation of the Foreseeability approach. When the rape was unconstrained by the setting, that is when the rape had occurred in the past in this setting, and when the victim herself had been raped before, the assignment of fault to the victim was highest, as were the ratings of the extent to which her behavior the night of the rape probably contributed to her being raped.

Apparently, for female observers, a victim who knows of the danger of rape (since she has been raped), and who enters a setting where rape is not uncommon, she is most responsible for her own victimization--she should have known better.

Male observers seemed to use a slight variation of the "Semi-logical Division of Responsibility" approach. When the setting constrained rape, that is when rape is uncommon, and the victim had been raped before, the males assigned the greatest degree of fault to the victim, and indicated that her behavior the night of the rape probably led to her being raped. In the Semi-logical model, since the setting is ruled out as important, the observer seeks a possible cause in the other factors. Given that the victim had been raped before, the Semi-logical model leads the observers to assign the victim more responsibility.

Thus, in this first study we find evidence for both of the hypothesized approaches to assigning responsibility. Not surprisingly, the setting manipulation interacted with the other variables. A sex difference in approaches was not anticipated. Most prior research has indicated sex differences, but they have usually involved the amount of responsibility assigned to the victim, rather than a strategy difference.

In our more recent research we have been seeking a less explicit means to manipulate the physical context. Although the information that the setting had been the scene of many versus no rapes undoubtedly altered observers perceptions of the setting, we would like to use observers a priori perceptions of settings to manipulate the physical context.

In this recent research we are attempting to categorize settings in a manner similar to that employed by Price and Bouffard (1974). They assessed the extent to which certain settings constrained a whole set of behaviors, as well as the perceived appropriateness of certain behavior/setting pairs. Our concern is obviously not with the appropriateness of behavior/setting pairs since rape is never appropriate, rather we would like to determine what characteristics influence the perception of a setting as one in which rape is likely or unlikely.

We have just begun this series of investigations, and can report on a preliminary study. In this study we began by presenting a series of settings to subjects and asking them to rate the settings on a series of dimensions. Included in the items were ratings of the "perceived probability of a woman being raped in the setting" and the "perceived dangerousness of the setting".

The settings we used were not simply physical locations, but included other information which we felt was necessary to insure that all subjects were rating the same setting. For example, if we had given the subjects "park" to rate, some subjects might have been rating a dark empty park, while others were rating a sunny park full of people. In the particular

settings we used in this study we defined the settings by physical location, time of day, and absence of other people. We ended up with settings like:

During the day, alone in your home at night, alone in a park during the day, alone in a police station

From the combined ratings of the perceived probability of rape, and the dangerousness of the setting we selected two settings to assess the impact of setting variations. The two we selected from the opposite ends of the rankings were:

at night, alone in a police station

at night, alone in a park

We then created two rape scenarios identical except for the physical context of the rape, and we presented these to a group of observers. Observers evaluated the rape episode on a number of dimensions, but the results were fairly clear and consistent.

When the rape took place in the high probability/dangerous setting (the park)

1. greater responsibility was assigned to the victim
2. the victim was judged to be the type of person who gets herself into these situations
3. the victim was perceived as having been insufficiently careful
4. in addition, the ratings indicated that she should have known better than to be in that setting

The sex of the observer did not interact with the setting manipulation on any of the items, although there were sex differences on many items. Most indicating, as usual, a tendency for males to blame the victim more.

At the present time, then, it would seem that the "Foreseeability" approach is the more likely strategy used by observers. The victim raped in a constrained setting was perceived in a more positive light in the present

study, even by males. Obviously some further refinement is necessary since the two studies presented are not even wholly consistent. Possibly the explicit manipulation of the setting in the first study and the implicit manipulation in the second study will prove to be an important distinction.

The need for further research into the implications of physical context manipulations should be clear from the handout. There has been little attempt to provide a range of contexts that differ in the research to date. With three exceptions, two of these by Drs. Calhoun, Selby and myself, the settings used have been of the type that observers would probably consider high probability of rape settings. They are also, based on actual statistics, settings that account for a small proportion of the rapes that are reported.

The second social context variable that I would like to mention briefly is the Interpersonal Context. In this category we are primarily considering the interpersonal relationship that existed between the rapist and the victim prior to the rape. There are two major reasons for considering the impact of the prior relationship on the social perception of rape. First of all, although most reported rapes are committed by strangers, and the proportion is somewhere around 70%, there are still a substantial number that do occur within the context of some prior relationship (Schram, 1978). Secondly, it would seem that a significant proportion of rapes that are not reported may involve cases where the victim and offender were acquainted. If this is the case, then an understanding of naive observers perceptions of such cases may assist in helping these victims deal with the trauma of rape. Since rape victims are also naive observers, they may be subject to many of the misperceptions that we uncover.

The study that I described earlier, by Calhoun, Selby and Warring (1976), involved a slight manipulation of prior relationship, but the extent of the relationship was minor.

We have just recently completed a more extensive examination of the potential impact of prior relationship. The study, on the handout as Selby, Cann, Calhoun, and Johnson (1978), involved a manipulation of the length and type of prior relationship. The rapist was described as someone the victim had been dating for either a few days, six months or a year. In addition, it was revealed that during the dating they had previously engaged in intercourse, or had not had prior intercourse. There was also a control group in which the rapist was presented as a stranger.

We obtained a number of ratings concerning observers' perceptions of the victim's role and the rapist's role in the rape episode. To analyze these we combined the ratings based on a factor analysis. There were 6 variables that resulted:

1. fault to victim
2. fault to rapist
3. liking of victim
4. liking of rapist
5. sex as the motivation for the rape
6. circumstances as the cause

An initial analysis revealed that the length of the relationship had no effect, so we collapsed across that variable and included the "stranger" control group. This new analysis was on a 2 x 3 (sex of observer x type of relationship) design.

The results were fairly clear:

1. The victim was perceived as most at fault when she had been dating the rapist, and had had prior intercourse.

   Next most responsible was the victim who was raped by a stranger.

   The victim who had been dating the rapist, but had not had prior intercourse, was perceived as least at fault.

2. The pattern for the fault assigned to the rapist was not a precise reversal.

   The rapist who was a stranger was perceived as most at fault, rather than the dating/no intercourse rapist.

   The rapist who had had prior intercourse with the victim was perceived as least at fault.

   The dating/no intercourse rapist fell midway between these extremes.

3. The victim was least well liked when she had had prior intercourse. There were no differences between the victims raped by the stranger or the dating/no intercourse.

4. The liking for the rapist was unaffected by the manipulations in general, he was not well liked.

5. Sex as the motivation for the rape was rated lowest when the rapist was a stranger. There was no difference between the two dating conditions.

6. The circumstances were judged as least important when the rape involved the dating/no intercourse rapist. There was no difference between the other two conditions.

These results indicated quite clearly that a woman who is raped by a man she had previously had intercourse with is likely to be perceived as very responsible for the rape. These data show that she is perceived as most at fault then, and the rapist is perceived as least at fault.

The ratings of interpersonal liking also indicate that this type of victim is perceived in a more negative light.

Again, if you look through the handout you will see that very few studies have considered differences in prior relationships in examining the social perception processes. The present results suggest that this variable could be of some importance.

In closing I would like to point out that although I have discussed these context variables separately, it is clear that a full understanding of the processes involved will require research in which the interactions between these are considered.

For example, it would not be surprising to find that a rape which is described as occurring in a setting which is perceived as relatively safe, like the victim's home, is interpreted differently if the offender is someone with whom the victim has some prior relationship, rather than a stranger. Similarly, a rape occurring in a dangerous setting, but committed by a man known by the victim creates a totally new impression. It is our hope that some of these questions, involving the social context variables will receive greater attention.

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	Independent Var	Time of Day	Location	Activity	Relationship
Jones and Aronson JPSP, 1973,26,415-419	Respectability	night	Campus Mall	to car after class	stranger
Luginbuhl and Mullin unpub, 1976, NC State	Respectability	night	Campus Street	to car after class	stranger
Calhoun,Selby and Warring Hum.Rel, 1976,29,517-529	Rape history of victim Rapes in area Relationship	night	Campus	return from library	stranger awareness
Scroggs exp 1 JASP, 1976,6,360-368	Provocativeness Damage	night	Parked car	to car after grocery shop.	awareness
exp 2	Resistance	night	Dark alley	return from class	stranger
Feldman-Summers & Lindner CJ & Beh,1976,3,135-149	Respectability Type of Crime	night	Street	to car after shopping	stranger
Smith,Keating, et al J Res Pers,1976,10,346-357	Respectability Relationship	night	Small wooded park	going home	stranger awareness surface mutuality (minor)
Seligman,Brickman & Koulack J of Pers,1977,45,554-563	Physical Attract Type of Crime	night	Alley	home from work	stranger
L'Armand and Pepitone APA, 1977	Sexual History Corroboration	unclear	parked car in city park	unclear	stranger mutuality (Minor) mutuality (Major)
Barnett and Feild JSP,1978,104,271-277	Respectability	night	Alley	return home from work	stranger
Calhoun, Selby, Cann & Keller. Brit.J Soc & Clin, 1978,17,191	Physical Attract	night	Car in parking lot	unstated	stranger

	Independent Var	Time of Day	Location	Activity	Relationship
Cann,Calhoun &Selby Hum.Rel, In Press	Sexual History	night	Parking lot	unstated	stranger
Feild un pub	Type of Rape Race of Victim Physical Attract Sexual History Race of defendent Strength of evidence	night	Own bedroom	request to use phone by stranger	stranger
Cann, Calhoun & Selby un pub	Sexual History Prior rapes of victim	night	Own home	man forces entry to home	stranger
Calhoun, Cann, Selby & Magee. up pub	Victim Emotion	night	Car in parking lot	return to car after work	stranger
Selby, Calhoun & Cann un pub	Rapist Motivation Basis of Motivation	night	Parking lot	return home	stranger
Selby, Cann, Calhoun & Johnson, un pub	Length of Relationship Type of Relationship	night	Own home	unclear	stranger mutuality (minor) mutuality (major)
Calhoun, Selby, Cann, Peabody & Shockley	Prior Rapes of victim Prior Rapes by Rapist	night	Campus	return home	stranger